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Cooking Lesson

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by Pamela Stinson

Florence Potts didn't need to watch the time. The ticking of the small mantle clock could be heard in all five rooms of their house. It was enough to keep her in rhythm as she prepared the midday meal for Raymond's first visit back home. He would be there with the girls at a quarter to twelve, three hours away still, and she would use every minute of it to prepare a meal fit to serve at exactly noon, the same time as they always ate.

Already, she had laid out the roast when she awoke at five o'clock that morning. She had tended the garden, nursing the drying plants to steal one more growth from them before the August heat shriveled their efforts. She had cut up chunks of carrots and big hunks of onion to keep the roast company. It was ready to slide in the oven. Later, she would slice the last okra from their garden, dip it in flour, salt and pepper, and fry it up nice and crisp the way Raymond and Riley liked it. Joseph, her first born, liked his okra softer, but "pay day ain't every day," she thought. Joseph still had his wife. The okra would be crisp.

She had also decided she would make a cake from scratch, the only kind worth eating, something that woman of Raymond's, with her boxed mixes and city, liberal church ways, never learned. Flo's mother had taught her how to make a cake more than fifty years ago, back when women recognized their God-given place and could make that place a home. As soon as Flo had been old enough to pull up a stool and reach the kitchen counter, her mother had shown her how to sift the flour. Mother would scoop it up from the bin and turn the handle on the sifter with the small red knob, while Flo watched the flour float down into the glass bowl. It reminded her of the snow falling in the water globes Johnson Mercantile displayed each Christmas. Mother had made everything graceful and polished, and she had spent a lifetime of afternoons teaching Flo the art of being a wife and mother.

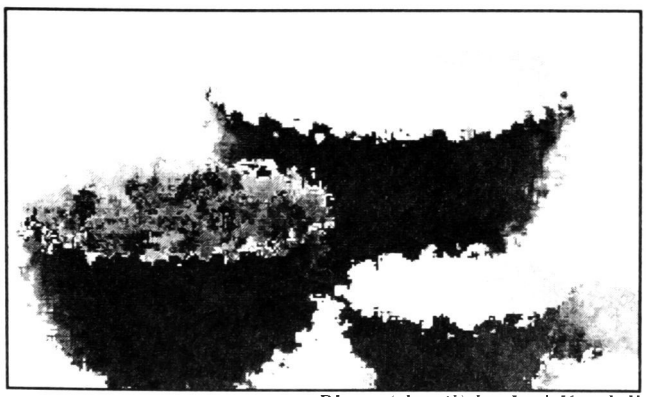

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

Shortly after the November when Flo turned eight, Mother had taught her how to quilt. The quilt frame hung suspended from the ceiling in Mother's bedroom. Each winter evening, Mother would loosen the rags holding up the frame corners and then lower the frame over the bed she shared with Papa. Then she and Flo would kneel at the frame as though in prayer, stitching for hours, their hands moving in tiny, lilting stitches. Time and again, Flo would study her mother's soft hands, memorizing the movements and distance between the needle's sinking into the calico fabric and rising again through the cotton. Nothing felt better than to hear Mother brag about how small Flo's stitches were.

The women from the Eastern Star organization sold quilts every Saturday in the town square. Once a month, Flo and her mother would walk by them on the way to the store for dried goods. The quilts were bold, with yellow flower appliques and bright blue log cabins pouncing on the viewer. Flo had paused in front of them once, almost admiring the colors until Mother had stopped her, quietly pointing out the long stitches. "They're large enough to hook a toe under," Mother had whispered, and Flo had giggled and walked on. Mother wouldn't even stop to look at the quilts that had been knotted instead. "There's someone who has

no pride in her work," Mother said, and Flo had silently nodded agreement.

In the summer time, Flo had helped with the garden and canning while her five older brothers went out in the fields to pick cotton. Mother had showed her how to pickle cucumbers, keeping them as crisp as when they were first pulled from the vine. She taught her how to strain berries, capturing the seeds in a cheese cloth the fruit stained a bright purple. And she taught her how to make bread, kneading the dough just the right amount of time so that it rose to a feathery height. All of this her mother had passed down to her, sharing the wealth of countless generations of mothers, of farmers' wives, of Christian women.

Men didn't appreciate this learning and they weren't supposed to. Riley might grunt his approval when he bit into his morning biscuits, though he would never ask how she made them so light and fluffy. Mother had said a woman's recipes were part of her mystery, like the delicate curves she hid beneath her apron strings. They could be uncovered when properly bidden, but should never be flaunted. It was enough to see Riley clear his plate, sopping up the last bit of butter and honey with the remaining crumbs. Then she could feel quiet pride in a job well done.

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

Flo had intended to pass all of this knowledge on to her own daughter, but it never happened. Joseph had come, then Raymond. Then the winter she no longer talked about, when the daughter she should have had quit growing, died inside of her.

She had told Riley something was wrong, she couldn't feel the baby moving any more. He had smiled and said she "always fretted like ol' Blackie did over a new heifer." Pretty soon, she'd be stomping at the ground. When she had shown her hurt, he had tried to soften it by adding that, "All women worried. Wait until the doctor's visit. See if everything ain't just fine."

"No," she had said. "It's different this time. I can tell." Then Riley had grown impatient and had looked at her the same way he did when she asked him to check a noise in the night, and he knew it was going to be the shed door come unlatched and banging in the wind. Nothing else. He refused to talk about it any more.

So she had waited, and when the bleeding started two days later, she told herself it was God's

will. She was meant to serve men, only men, and she would dedicate herself to doing it well. And to the best of her memory, Flo thought, she always had, even during her season of Job, when God had tested her.

The wooden spoon beat the cake batter wildly against the glass bowl as Flo remembered that winter. She forced her hand to slow down, smoothly blending the cake batter. Little movements were better.

Raymond deserved good food. Raymond deserved a good woman who would fix it for him. Raymond deserved more than that woman had ever given him. That woman, that Salomé, that . . . Flo would say worse if she weren't herself a Christian woman.

Regina had sunk her claws into Raymond like a wild animal, and Raymond hadn't known how to shake her off so he said he loved her. But that woman didn't know what love was. Animals cared for their young'ns better than she had. They had seen more mothering from the sheep than that woman ever gave, and her running off proved it.

Flo had known her kind from the start. Regina'd come waltzing in their house every Christmas, face painted like a two-dollar floozie, and she'd plop down her fancy, crystal serving dish like the Lord God, Almighty, had lent a hand in making Jello with her. It was all show. A gawdy red dessert, forced into a mold so's you wouldn't know it was no more than colored sugar water. Regina's face had crumbled as fast as that Jello when Flo had stirred it up into her plain serving bowl and set it on the table. But Regina needed to be taught. Men were supposed to have their stomachs filled with more than fluffy desserts. And they were supposed to have sons to carry on their names even if it meant their wives couldn't fit into their skin-tight jeans. Men needed more than a woman like Regina.

Raymond had been too good to her. He was a smart boy, but soft, much too soft, always had been. As a child, he was the son who flinched when the cattle had to be branded, and once, when a deformed lamb was born, he had hidden away all day, tucked away in the tree line, far enough from the house so he wouldn't hear the bleating when what had to be done was done.

"He's too soft for his own good," she had told Riley, and Riley had agreed, and when their gentle mare, the one they'd had since Joseph was a baby, broke his leg in the brambles of the back forty acres, Riley took Raymond and a rifle and they took care of it. And when, many years later, Regina had threatened to leave Raymond if he wouldn't relent, wouldn't let her leave the babies at home to get a paralegal job that paid next to nothing anyway, Flo had whispered to Riley again, and Riley had pointed out to Raymond that Joseph's wife Amanda had given up her career for her family. Amanda knew what was important, and any woman should be able to learn that. It was only a matter of time after that. A matter of time and gentle, small movements.

"Them girls need a woman around," she had told Riley, after Regina had left. And because Riley had agreed with her, he talked to Raymond, and the boy had listened, but he still had them claws in him. So Flo had waited until the right moment, until the first idea had settled in, and then she had told Riley, "Joseph's working too hard. He needs some help at that store." And Riley had nodded again and done the talking, and now Raymond had a job. It was planting seeds, that was all. The men could go out in the fields with their tillers or their noisy combines and they could stir up the ground for all to see. She was happy to put in the small seeds and then know she'd taken a part in the growing.

The girls would be there soon. "Best get the cake in the oven now," Flo thought. Later, she would mix another one. She would make the girls watch, and she would teach them her trick about eggs. She'd show them how you could crack eggs in a measuring cup and swirl it around so that your shortening didn't stick to the sides when you measured it. Mother had shown her that so many years ago.

It was a good trick. Knowing how to make things turn loose.

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